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When Victims Become Killers: The Rwandan Genocide

When Victims Become Killers by Mahmood Mamdani attempts to shed light on the tragedy that was the Rwandan Genocide, which took place in 1994 after the Rwandan Civil War and killed between 500,000 and 1,000,000 Rwandans in a 100 day period (“Rwandan Genocide”), and offer ideas for political reform and understanding in the region. The war was between the Hutu, a group of people that made up the majority of Rwanda, and the Tutsi and more moderate Hutu, groups of people that made up the minority of the Rwandan people. Mahmood Mamdani argues that while events like the Rwandan Genocide are despicable, they are very possible when taking history, geography, and politics into consideration, and must be carefully addressed in order to prevent such an event from occurring again.

Mamdani discusses identities that have been ingrained into our society: cultural, market-based, and political. He discusses the Hutu and Tutsi as political identities, which he believes caused the racialization of the groups and ultimately lead to the genocide, and argues that this view is the only way of achieving political reform in Rwanda. Mamdani also advocates for “international responsibility” in order to truly have successful transformation in the region.

Throughout the book, Mamdani reviews the history of how the Hutu and Tutsi came into existence, and the effect colonialism had on them as political identities, eventually leading to the Hutu becoming the majority and rising to power. This caused the RPF, or the Rwandan Patriotic Front, to be formed by the Tutsi in order to take the Hutu head on and get their identity back. The Rwandan Civil War ensued due to this uprising, and lasted from 1990-1994. Mamdani argues that several factors contributed to the war, especially the democratization of the region, which caused political entities to form and clash. Other factors that influenced tensions during the war include the assassination of the first Hutu president, economic troubles, and the alienation of the radical Hutus. Although the Rwandan Genocide has been over for some time, tension is still very present in the scarred region, and political freedom remains intangible.

Mamdani’s conclusion is that Rwanda is at a political crossroads and has two options: continuation of the civil war, or political reconciliation in the form of other victor’s justice or survivor’s justice. The precondition for a victor’s justice would be a victory, which Mamdani argues would mean the continuation of a civil war. Survivor’s justice would name both sides as survivors, and political reform would ensue.

What was most interesting to me in Mamdani’s analysis was his comparison of the Rwandan Genocide to other genocides, most notably the Holocaust. Many people group all mass killings together and assume that they are similar; however, the Rwandan Genocide was very different in that while the government encouraged it, they did not play a part. Instead of carting Tutsi and moderate Hutus off to a concentration camp and quietly and neatly executing them, civilians turned against each other, neighbor against neighbor, and brutally slaughtered each other in order to survive. Mamdani’s take on the Rwandan Civil War and Genocide was very eye-opening and I hope that the “simmering volcano” in Rwanda is “diffused” by democracy and political reform and that more awareness of this tragedy and conflict is spread.

Works Cited

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